

PARSHAS EMOR

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Emor, 5632

The parsha begins with an unusual turn of phrase. The language used -- "Emor ... ve'amarta" ("Speak ... and tell") -- seems to call for special interpretation. Why does the Torah use this double mention of "amira"?

Apparently, this question also bothered Chazal. How do we know? Because the first paragraph of Medrash Rabba on the parsha addresses this very question. The methodology that Medrash Rabba uses to provide an answer is straightforward. The Amoraim there scour Tanach to find other pesukim which also use a double mention of "amar", and thus may resonate with the pasuk here.

Chazal find such an "echo" in a pasuk in Tehilim (12:7) That pasuk says: "Imeros HaShem ahmahros tehoros; kesef tzaruf, ba'alil la'aretz, mezukak shivasayim (ArtScroll: "The words of HaShem are pure words; like purified silver, clear to the world, refined sevenfold.").

The Sfas Emes notes that the pasuk in Tehilim introduces the subject of tahara (purity; i.e., "ahmahros tehoros") into the discussion. He seems to wonder what the subject of purity is doing here. To understand what the Sfas Emes says next, some background information may be helpful.

We live with a fundamental metaphysical problem: How can we, as human beings -- bassar (flesh, with all of its weaknesses) vadahm (blood == volition, with all its selfishness) -- achieve a state of purity?

To this question, the Sfas Emes replies: We can achieve purity because HaShem created the world with His ma'amoros (spoken words; note that we are back to "Emor"). And HaShem's ma'amar implants tahara in the whole world. Thus, what the Sfas Emes (and Chazal) learn from the pasuk in Tehilim is that amira brings with it the possibility of tahara. In other words, the double mention of amira at the beginning of Emor is there to remind us that HaShem formed this world with his ma'amar, and thus to draw our attention to the possibility of achieving a respectable level of purity.

The Sfas Emes develops this picture further by pointing to another sense of the word "amira" -- a meaning that may not be widely known. A pasuk in Devarim (26:18) tells us: VeHaShem he'emircha ... liheyos Lo le'ahm segula ... " (ArtScroll: "And HaShem has distinguished you ... to be for Him a treasured people ...") Chazal (Berachos 6a) read this pasuk as telling us: "... veAhni eh'eseh eschem chativa ahchas ... " (" You shall make Me a single "chativa", and I will make you a single "chativa").

Obviously, the key word here is "chativa". What does this word mean? Both here in Berachos and in Chagiga (3a), where this ma'amar also appears, Rashi translates "chativa" as "shevach" -- praise. The Sfas Emes reads the word "he'emircha" as "chibur vedibuk -- i.e., clinging together, held tightly. Thus, "Emor ... ve'amarta" becomes "Cling to HaShem's Presence and you will achieve purity".

(Before you fall off your chair at the Sfas Emes's innovativeness, note that in his authoritative dictionary, Marcus Jastrow -- who was not a chassidische rebbe -- translates "chativa" as "object of love". This translation fits in neatly with the Sfas Emes's reading.)

The Sfas Emes recognizes that we may need some help at this point. Accordingly, he brings up reinforcements, with some "tosefes bi'ur". This "further explanation" actually introduces additional mind-stretching ideas. The Sfas Emes comments that what he has told us thus far in this ma'amar dovetails with "Sefiras Ha'omer". (In the Sfas Emes's milieu, people did not pronounce the letter "ayin" very differently from the way they pronounced the letter "aleph." Hence, the Sfas Emes assumes that we are all aware that he is reading "omer" as an allusion to "Emor". Because this remez is so obvious, he does not mention the connection.)

The Sfas Emes explains that, like the beginning of this week's parsha ("Emor ..."), Sefiras Ha'omer is about achieving purity. Thus, in the tefila that we say after counting the Omer: "You commanded us to count the omer in order that we may be purified ..." Our redemption from Egypt showed that we can achieve freedom from all desires and all commands other than those of HaShem. The Sfas Emes tells us that "freedom" means exactly that: to be able constantly to do the will of HaShem. Our redemption from Egypt demonstrated that possibility. That demonstration, however, was limited to the special case in which miracles were in operation.

Proceeding ever upward, after Pesach we go to the more relevant, everyday case -- the experience that "Sefiras Ha'omer" brings to mind. (The Sfas Emes is reading the word "sefira" as "cutting away extraneous material". Cutting away the clutter enables us to clarify what is truly essential. This alternate meaning of the Hebrew root SPR in the sense of cutting away continues in modern Hebrew, e.g., with "sappar" -- a barber. Further, the Sfas Emes is reading the word "omer" in its Biblical sense of a middah, a measure (Shemos, 16:36).

From middah as a measure, he moves on to see middos as character traits. Thus, Sefiras Ha'omer is a process in which we cut away from our middos -- our behavioral qualities -- everything that is extraneous to our Avodas HaShem. By discarding everything that is not conducive to doing HaShem's will, we can achieve purity even in a world in which miracles are not apparent.

The Sfas Emes concludes with some words about Shabbos and the weekdays. Shabbos is total commitment (hisbatlus) to HaShem. By contrast, the weekdays are there to enable us to extend the chiyus of Shabbos to the mundane, material world. The Sfas Emes explains that is why the weekdays are called "yemei ha'avoda". Not only are those days "work days". They can also be days of unique Avodas HaShem.

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